DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 438 CG 013 381

AUTHOR Elman, Donald; And Others
TITLE How Sexual Orientation and Physical Attractiveness Affect Impressions of Males.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (86th, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Homosexuality; Individual Characteristics; Interaction Process Analysis; *Interpersonal Attraction; Males; *Perception; *Reactive Behavior; Research Projects; *Sexuality; Social Attitudes; *Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

Stereotyped impressions of male homosexuals and the underlying importance of sexuality in social attraction and perceptions were investigated. Male (N=80) and female (N=80) college students responded to either an attractive or an unattractive photo of a male stimulus person, who was identified to half of the subjects as a homosexual. Compared to the heterosexual, the homosexual was rated as less likeable, less personally and socially adjusted, and less masculine, but not less capable mentally. Results indicated that sexuality is a relevant but not overriding component of social reactions as a function of these independent variables. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED169438

How Sexual Orientation and Physical Attractiveness Affect Impressions of Males*

Donald Elman, T. Jeffrey Killebrew, and Cheryl Oros

Kent State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D Elman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Abstract

This experiment investigated stereotyped impressions of male homosexuals and the underlying importance of sexuality in social attraction and perceptions. Eighty male and 80 female college students responded to either an attractive or an unattractive photo of a male stimulus person, who was identified to half of the subjects as a homosexual. Compared to the heterosexual, the homosexual was rated as less likeable, less personally and socially adjusted, and less masculine, but not less capable mentally. Interactions were interpreted to mean that sexuality is a relevant but not overriding component of social reactions as a function of these independent variables.

*Presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, Toronto, August, 1973.

CG013381

How Sexual Orientation and Physical Attractiveness Affect Impressions of Males

Donald Elman, T. Jeffrey Killebrew, and Cheryl Oros
Kent State University

Some time ago, a popular comic strip portrayed the plight of a female student who discovered that her attractive male friend was a homosexual. In real life, if person A receives such information about person B, how does A's perception of B change?

The Homosexual Stereotype

Part of the answer undoubtedly depends upon our societal stereotype of male homosexuals. Although the question of which personal attributes are ascribed to homosexuals has been the focus of heated social controversy, it has not been the subject of much objective, experimental study. The sparse research that does exist tends to support the fairly obvious generalization that homosexuals are not favorably regarded in our culture (Berry & Marks, 1969; Wolfgang & Wolfgang, 1971).

Two more recent studies (Gurwitz & Marcus, 1978; Weissbach & Zagon, 1975) both presented a videotaped target person who was described to half of the subjects as a member of a Gay students' group. Both of these experiments suggested that ratings of certain traits, such as "strong" or "emotional," were affected by the homosexuality manipulation, while other traits, such as "ambitious" or "intellectual,"

were not. One purpose of the present study was to gather more comprehensive data on the scope of the homosexual stereotype.

Sexual Undertones in Person Perception

An underlying theoretical issue raised by the comic strip example is the significance of sexual attraction or aversion as a mediating factor in the effects of both sexual orientation and physical attractiveness. Deviant sexual behavior has traditionally been a central concept in most definitions of homosexuality. The observation that antihomosexual attitudes are positively correlated with sex guilt seems to support the importance of the sexual component in perceptions of homosexuals (Berry & Marks, 1969; Dunbar, Brown, & Amoroso, 1973; MacDonald & Games, 1974). However, the current Zeitgeist among mental health professional groups, as well as outspoken homosexuals, is to define homosexuality not as a sexual perversion or illness but as an alternative, valid lifestyle. From this viewpoint, prejudice against homosexuals may occur simply because they belong to a nonconforming minority group, without regard to the nature of the nonconformity.

A parallel issue has arisen in the study of physical attractiveness. Most researchers in this area appear to focus on opposite-sex perceptions because attractiveness presumably has its main impact in heterosexual relationships (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). Yet, some studies have suggested that the effects of physical attractiveness may not depend

on sexuality itself. For example, same-sex raters prefer attractive others about as much as opposite-sex raters do (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Young children--who supposedly have no overt sexual motivations--respond to physical attractiveness in the same way as adults (Dion, 1977).

If sexuality per se is not a sufficient explanation, then the effects of both sexual orientation and physical attractiveness on person perception might follow a more abstract principle. Specifically, social impressions may reflect the degree to which a given stimulus person corresponds to highly valued social norms. Since heterosexuality and good looks are both regarded positively in our society, disparagement of any aberrations may occur because they deviate from the socially-defined ideal.

The second purpose of the present experiment was to attempt to test the "sexual" versus the "social ideal" interpretations by orthogonally varying the sexual orientation and physical attractiveness of a male target person who was rated by subjects of both sexes. If the sexual implications of these variables are important in determining impressions, then various possible interactions were hypothesized: 1) At least for female subjects, physical attractiveness might have a stronger effect in the heterosexual condition--where the target person is a potential sex object--than in the homosexual condition. 2) Relative to female subjects, males might downrate the homosexual more because he represents a personal threat to them. 3) Female subjects might react

more negatively to the attractive homosexual than to the unattractive one, as a sort of defensive response to the former's sexual unavailability.

Alternatively, if the "social ideal" explanation is more nearly valid than the "sexuality" notion, the effects of each variable should be relatively independent. In that case few, if any, interactions would be expected.

Method

Subjects and Overview

In the context of a "person perception accuracy" study, 80 male and 80 female General Psychology students were shown an information form on which a photograph of a male stimulus person (SP) appeared. Half of the subjects were led to believe that the SP was a homosexual and half were not. Of these groups, half were shown an attractive male photo and half an unattractive photo. Thus, the 2x2x2 between-subjects factorial design included the following factors: sexual orientation of SP, attractiveness of SP, and sex of subject. The dependent questionnaire consisted of several 9-point interpersonal judgment items.

Mixed-sex experimental groups, including four to eight subjects in each session, were run by a female experimenter. Within every session, subjects were randomly assigned to different experimental conditions.

Sexual Orientation Manipulation

The alleged purpose of the study was "to compare the person perception accuracy of untrained college students with that of clinical psychologists." Subjects were each given a 1-page, photocopied "Student Information Form" that had supposedly been completed by a student at another university. The form included such standard information as age, career goal, extracurricular interests, etc. On the page was the question, "To what university organizations do you belong?" followed by five lines. Written on the first three lines were: 1) Off-campus Student Organization; 2) Bicycle Club; and 3) Educational Assistance Organization (tutoring). In the homosexual condition the fourth line read: 4) Gay Liberation Front. In the heterosexual condition it was blank.

Physical Attractiveness Manipulation

In the upper right corner of each form was a 4 cm x 5 cm black-and-white facial photograph. Prior to the main experiment, 120 male yearbook photos had been rated on a 9-point attractiveness scale by 60 male and female college students. The two photos rated most attractive by all subjects (Ms = 7.1 and 6.6) and the two rated least attractive (Ms = 2.3 and 2.5) were used in the main study. Because preliminary analyses revealed no differences between the two photos at each attractiveness level, the data reported below were collapsed across the photo pairs.

Dependent Measures

The dependent questionnaire included manipulation checks on perceived homosexuality and attractiveness, liking questions (e.g., "How much would you like to get to know this person better?"), and a variety of bipolar, 9-point trait ratings. Several types of trait dimensions were used: 1) Sex-role-related traits (aggressive-unaggressive, athletic-unathletic, dominant-submissive, emotional-unemotional, independent-dependent, leader-follower, masculine-feminine, strong-weak); 2) Interpersonal relationship traits (considerate-inconsiderate, friendly-unfriendly, honest-dishonest, moral-immoral, sensitive-insensitive, sincere-insincere, warm-cold); 3) Cognitive abilities (artistic-unartistic, creative-uncreative, intelligent-unintelligent, talented-untalented); 4) Adjustment-related traits (conventional-unconventional, happy-unhappy, normal-abnormal, well adjusted-maladjusted); and 5) Achievement-oriented traits (ambitious-unambitious, rich-poor, successful-unsuccessful).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks

Responses on each questionnaire item were analyzed by a 2x2x2 analysis of variance. The sexual orientation manipulation had a strong effect on "heterosexual-homosexual" ratings. When the target person was identified as a member of the Gay Liberation Front, he was rated as significantly less heterosexual (M = 2.3) than when not so identified

(M = 7.1), $F(1, 152) = 308.5$, $p < .0001$. The physical attractiveness manipulation was also highly effective, with means of 6.3 and 4.1 respectively on a 9-point attractiveness scale, $F(1, 152) = 67.6$, $p < .0001$.

Sexual Orientation and the Homosexual Stereotype

The effects of sexual orientation were strongest on liking and personal adjustment ratings, somewhat less consistent on sex-role-related and interpersonal relationship traits, and generally nonsignificant on achievement-oriented traits and cognitive abilities. Considering the liking measures, subjects indicated they would "like to get to know" the target person and to have him "as a close friend" more in the heterosexual than in the homosexual condition (both, $p < .001$). As to personal adjustment ratings, the heterosexual was judged to be more normal, happy, well-adjusted, and conventional than the homosexual (all, $p < .001$). Looking at sex-role-related traits, the heterosexual was rated as more dominant ($p < .0001$), masculine ($p < .0001$), strong ($p < .0001$), athletic ($p < .05$), and more of a leader ($p < .01$), but not significantly more aggressive, independent, or unemotional. On interpersonal relationship traits, the heterosexual was rated as more moral ($p < .001$), honest ($p < .01$), warm ($p < .01$), and considerate ($p < .05$) than the homosexual, but there were no differences for friendly, sensitive, or sincere. Finally, there were no significant effects on any cognitive abilities or achievement-oriented traits, except

that the homosexual was judged as less "successful in his chosen career" than the heterosexual ($p < .005$).

From these results, the following picture of the male homosexual stereotype can be derived. First, the liking measures reveal a marked degree of social aversion toward homosexuals. Second, the trait rating patterns suggest that homosexuals are seen as deficient in qualities that relate to personality functioning and daily social interactions, but they are not derogated with respect to mental functioning.

Physical Attractiveness and Sexual Orientation

As expected, the physical attractiveness variable had a significant main effect on most measures. More central to the present hypotheses are the possible interactions among sexual orientation, physical attractiveness, and sex of subject. Overall, the findings partially supported the idea that sexuality is important in interpersonal ratings. A significant ($p < .03$) three-way interaction occurred on only one liking question, as illustrated in Figure 1. Consistent with the first "sexuality" hypothesis, female subjects exhibited a significant physical attractiveness effect in the heterosexual condition ($p < .01$, Newman-Keuls test), but not in the homosexual condition. In line with the second sexuality prediction, male subjects downrated the homosexual more than females did ($p < .05$). No support was found for the third interaction hypothesis.

Among the trait ratings there was a significant sexual orientation x physical attractiveness interaction on five

of the sex-role-related traits (athletic-unathletic, aggressive-unaggressive, dominant-submissive, leader-follower, and strong-weak). The pattern of means was essentially the same for each trait, as illustrated in Figure 2 by a typical case--dominant-submissive. Generally, the attractive heterosexual was rated closer to the "masculine" side of each scale than either the unattractive heterosexual or the attractive homosexual (both, $p < .01$, Newman-Keuls tests). The unattractive heterosexual did not differ significantly from the unattractive homosexual. No other consistent interaction patterns were found.

Conclusions

Two general findings emerge from this study. First, knowing that a male is a homosexual affects one's impressions of his personality and social characteristics, but not of his mental abilities. Also, present-day college students seem reluctant to accept a male homosexual as a friend. Second, the results partially supported the notion that sexual undertones affect reactions to homosexuality and physical attractiveness, when liking and sex-role-related traits are being judged. However, the fact that the interaction patterns were not consistent across all dependent measures suggests that both the sexual and the social-ideal factors may operate simultaneously.

At least two limitations of the present study should be addressed in future research. First, female as well as male stimulus persons should be studied, since impressions

of female homosexuals may differ markedly from males. Second, alternate methods of exposure to the stimulus person should be employed, such as videotape or live encounters, to test the generality of the photograph method used here.

References

Berry, D. F., & Marks, P. A. Antihomosexual prejudice as a function of attitude toward own sexuality. Proceedings of the 77th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, 1969, 4, 573-574. (Summary)

Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. Physical attractiveness. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), Advances in experimental social psychology, Vol. 7. New York: Academic Press, 1974.

Dion, K. K. The incentive value of physical attractiveness for young children. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1977, 3, 67-70.

Dion, K. K., Berscheid, E., & Walster, E. What is beautiful is good. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1972, 24, 285-290.

Dunbar, J., Brown, M., & Amoroso, D. M. Some correlates of attitudes toward homosexuality. Journal of Social Psychology, 1973, 89, 271-279.

Gurwitz, S. B., & Marcus, M. Effects of anticipated interaction, sex, and homosexual stereotypes on first impressions. Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 1978, 8, 47-56.

MacDonald, A. P., & Games, R. G. Some characteristics of those who hold positive and negative attitudes toward homosexuals. Journal of Homosexuality, 1974, 1, 9-27.

Weissbach, T. A., & Zagon, G. The effect of deviant group membership upon impressions of personality. Journal of Social Psychology, 1975, 95, 263-266.

Wolfgang, A., & Wolfgang, J. Exploration of attitudes via physical interpersonal distance toward the obese, drug abusers, homosexuals, police, and other marginal figures. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 1971, 27, 510-512.

Figure 1

"How much would you like to get to know this person better?"

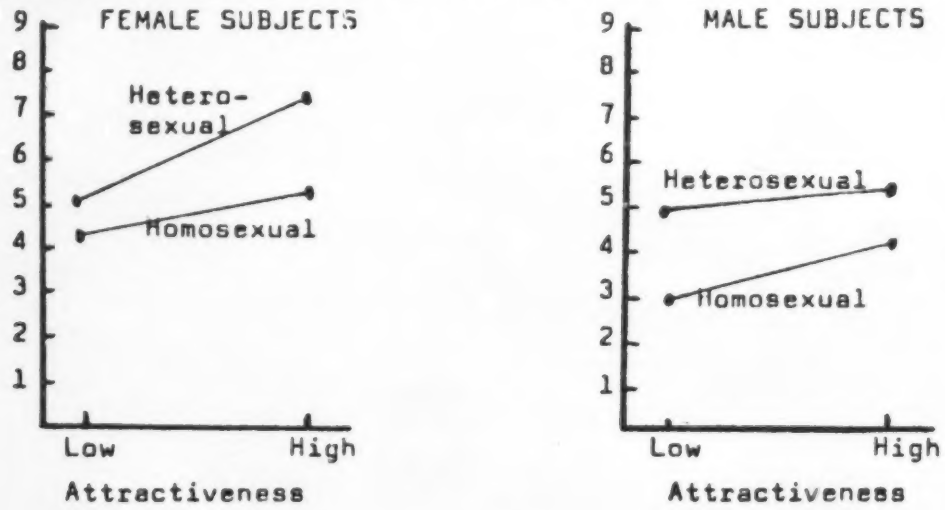

Figure 2

Typical Pattern of Sexual Orientation x Physical Attractiveness Interaction on Sex-role-related Traits